

SOCIAL SITUATIONS AND WHICH DESCRIPTIONS: ON VENTURINHA'S *DESCRIPTION OF SITUATIONS*

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I approach Venturinha's ideas on contextual epistemology from the perspective of linguistic practices of argumentation. I point to the "thick" descriptions of social situations as a common context in which our epistemic language-games take place. In this way, I explore promising connections of Venturinha's work to key concepts in recent speech act theory, social ontology and social epistemology.

KEYWORDS: contextualism, presumptive knowledge, social ontology, thick descriptions

1. Arguments and Enthymemes

Nuno Venturinha's erudite book *Description of Situations*¹ seeks to solve one of the perennial epistemological puzzles—can we find a solid ground for what we call knowledge in the space between epistemic fundamentalism and skepticism?—through a defense of a Wittgenstein-inspired contextualist approach. In view of Venturinha's expertise in Wittgensteinian philosophy,² this inspiration is not only unsurprising but also fruitful, as it lets him sketch an original form of contextualist epistemology grounded in linguistic practices.

Given the immense scope of the problems discussed, this brief book is a tour de force of concise exposition and tightly controlled argument. As a result, much remains implicit. The inevitable gaps can be filled by a principle-of-charity wielding reader and treated as intriguing enthymemes. However, in a compact text where lengthy elaborations are verboten, and detail is at times scarce, some of

¹ Nuno Venturinha, *Description of Situations: An Essay in Contextualist Epistemology* (Cham: Springer, 2018).

² E.g., Nuno Venturinha (ed.), *The Textual Genesis of Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

these enthymemes are hard to accommodate. Before I get to the gist of my commentary, let me briefly go through two examples, one from the opening and one from closing passages of the book. On p. 4 Venturinha speaks of permissibility and near-permissibility and refers to the classic work of David Lewis³ on score-keeping in language games. Venturinha is of course aware his own argument on (near-) permissible uses of language in describing actions connects to Lewis's point only by analogy, rather than substance, and offers this disclaimer: "Lewis is specifically interested in conversational rules that the speakers of any language can shift"⁴ (rather than in general (near-) permissibility of action-attributions Venturinha discusses).

Even if analogical, this argument is inaccurate. Lewis's *rules of accommodation for permissibility*, with the *master* permitting the *slave* to do certain actions, show how conversational rules, underlain by social conventions for the working of *performatives* (notably, those related to the status of authority), can be used to introduce changes to the social context by means of necessary accommodation. What *shifts* with a master's utterance such as "You can leave now" are *not* the rules of the conversation itself but the public conversational score—and, in result, the social context, including mutual rights and obligations governed by newly accommodated norms (the slave can go have his beer rather than wash the master's feet). With the aim of elucidating Austin's puzzle of performative speech—"how saying can make it so"—Lewis thus explains that "the boundary [of permissible actions] shifts [...] so as to make the master's statement true."⁵ In this way, the world catches up with the language, rather than the language with the world. Exploring this detail further, however, might be stimulating for Venturinha's own approach. In her analysis of Lewis's permissibility, Langton has argued that through the master's orders ("you can," "you cannot") "an *ought* of some kind does come into being, through a rule of accommodation: a local *ought*, relative to a context or practice, which itself stands in need of evaluation; perhaps a practice-internal *ought*, which depends, for its standing, on the worth of the practice itself."⁶ The curious interplay of practice-internal and practice-external considerations is very much in line with Venturinha's contextualist perspective, both in epistemic and moral contexts.

³ David Lewis, "Scorekeeping in a Language Game," *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8 (1979): 339–359.

⁴ Venturinha, *Description of Situations*, 4.

⁵ Lewis, "Scorekeeping in a Language Game," 341.

⁶ Rae Langton, "How to Get a Norm from a Speech Act," *The Amherst Lecture in Philosophy* 10 (2015): 1–33, here 27–28. Available online: <http://www.amherstlecture.org/langton2015/>.

On to the second example. When discussing the practical moral solution to the contextualist puzzles (how to maneuver between epistemic fundamentalism and skepticism), Venturinha writes:

If my account is right, then it seems as if no action could be considered essentially wrong for there would always be a reason to justify it, the reason that led the agent to decide that way.⁷

In the final passages of the book, Venturinha solves this puzzle by the application of his Disclosure Principle and the resultant self-evaluation of the agent leading to her profound feeling of either moral peace or torment. However, this might not have been necessary. This sentence—again, clearly an enthymematic shortcut—forgoes the distinction between the *motivating* reason and the *justifying* reason for action. The former is a reason “of” the action, a cause that moves the agent to do φ , whether consciously or not. The latter is a reason “for” the action, the public grounding the agent furnishes to defend the rationality of her action. These two types of reason can, of course, coincide: I might want to employ person X precisely because I genuinely find X the best candidate, given the official criteria and the extensive documentation of candidates X, Y, and Z, which the job committee has duly scrutinized. However, I can also give X a preference because he’s quite cute or, to use Searle’s example, is my old drinking buddy. All this while officially justifying my decision by arguing this is the most hard-working, etc., candidate. In the latter case, “the reason that led me to decide that way” could—even should—“be considered essentially wrong” and I can feel all the resulting moral regret Venturinha is describing (plus the public censure or even punishment, if the gap between the actually motivating and the publicly presented justifying reason is revealed). Venturinha’s brief discussion of *akrasia* goes some way toward solving this tension⁸—and it would be thrilling to see a more complete version of his argument elaborated within his overall contextualist proposal.

2. Thick Descriptions of Social Reality

Since I find such details to be what they are—mere *details*—they do not significantly distract from the overall argument of Venturinha’s essay. This argument sets off immediately in the opening sentence of the essay—“I am working at a table”—meant to serve as a guiding example for a contextual “description of situation,” as the title of the essay has it. Description, however, is a

⁷ Venturinha, *Description of Situations*, 94.

⁸ See Javier González de Prado, “Akrasia and the Desire to Become Someone Else: Venturinha on Moral Matters,” *Philosophia* 48 (2020): 1705–1711.

tricky task—and Venturinha, via his detailed linguistic analysis, diligently goes through different aspects of this trickiness. Let me focus on the chief activity here, namely, that of “working.” What is “working”? Well, it is not *not working*, we are rightly told,⁹ but in this negative “not working” we have some distant activities (“swimming in the pool”) and some neighboring activities (“tidying up the desk”). An important passage ensues:

And “tidying up the desk” can obviously be taken as “working” if we generalize the description, especially if we do not take “working” to be the specific task of “writing philosophy.” We come to grasp the meaning of *W* not merely by contrasting it to that of *A, B, C*, etc., but by calculating what can count as *W* from a set of contextually acceptable instances of *W* ranging from *W*₁ to *W*_{*n*}. That explains why we do not indefinitely go on to stipulate what *W* is not (*A, B, C*, etc.). This negative infinity is not processed by us, who focus instead on a circumscribable number of positive possibilities that the context in question elects. An extraordinarily complex interpretation is made at all times and it is through this framework that we organize reality. There is nothing like “working” in itself. What counts as such is something we lay down in our multifaceted linguistic practices.¹⁰

Many important things happen in this passage and I will have hardly anything more to say about Venturinha’s argument than what I can extract from it. Imagine the situation: a man is sitting at a table, looking at something (a book, a notebook, a computer screen, a keyboard), moving his hands in certain ways between some of these objects (say, a book and a keyboard). What is that man *doing*? Or, as Venturinha puts it, what does his doing “count as”? Venturinha spoils the surprise and tells us in the third word of the book that the man is *working*. However, *tidying up* the desk is another possible description; *playing* a strategy computer game is another option; and so is *exercising* his wrists; *testing* his new keyboard; *filling out* a tax return form; *learning* a foreign language; *planning* holidays; etc. All of these can be “contextually acceptable” descriptions of the current situation. Depending on the description, the situation gets ever more complex (he can be *instructing* his colleague how to fill out a tax form; *practicing* how to instruct him, etc.). But at the very least we have two levels of description: (1) that of directly observable body movements in a specified time and location; (2) that of what these particular body movements “mean” or “count as” in this situation. Gilbert Ryle, in his well-known distinction, calls (1) “thin” descriptions while (2) are called “thick”

⁹ Venturinha, *Description of Situations*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

descriptions.¹¹ A boy twitching his right eye might be simply... (1) twitching his eye (due to a nervous tic, perhaps), but he might also be (2) *winking*; *parodying* someone else's wink; or even *rehearsing* how to parody someone else's wink. Similarly, a composer sitting at a piano might be (1) *touching* on the piano keys, thereby producing sounds but also (2) *cancelling*, *modifying*, *assembling*, *reassembling*, *rehearsing*, etc., parts of his "Hungarian Rhapsody" in the making.¹² Venturinha's philosopher "working at a table" is in a similar situation: he is moving his hands over the keyboard, but also possibly doing any of the things mentioned above—plus, possibly, writing a commentary on Venturinha's book.

Ryle does not put it this way himself, but (1) largely correspond to what logical empiricists would call "protocol" or "observation sentences:" directly experienced, brute descriptions of empirical reality. (2) is not only a thicker but also a trickier description: indeed, "[a]n extraordinarily complex interpretation is made at all times and it is through this framework that we organize reality. There is nothing like 'working' in itself. What counts as such is something we lay down in our multifaceted linguistic practices."¹³ Three elements here—"framework that we organize reality," "counts as," and "our multifaceted linguistic practices"—all point in one direction, namely that of social ontology.¹⁴ "X counts as Y in context C," as the general formula for constitutive rules allowing for the imposition of socially recognizable status functions on objects, actions, or persons, is the very cornerstone of Searle's social ontology. In the thick social context of organized labor, job contracts, universities, publishing houses, royalties, scientific production indicators, etc. etc., moving one's hands over a table may *count as* "writing philosophy" and this, further, *as* "working" (clearly in Professor Venturinha's case; for someone different, for instance an aspiring aristocrat-philosopher, "writing philosophy" would rather count as pastime). Indeed, within this framework that we organize social reality, we constantly engage in our multifaceted linguistic

¹¹ Gilbert Ryle, "Thinking and Reflecting," in *The Human Agent: Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures, vol. I, 1966–1967* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1968), repr. in *Collected Papers, Volume 2: Collected Essays 1929–1968* (London: Routledge, 2009), 479–493; "The thinking of Thoughts: What is 'Le Penseur' doing?", *University Lectures* 18 (1968), repr. in *Collected Papers, Volume 2: Collected Essays 1929–1968* (London: Routledge, 2009), 494–510.

¹² Ryle, "Thinking and Reflecting," 491.

¹³ Venturinha, *Description of Situations*, 3.

¹⁴ See esp. John R. Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Raimo Tuomela, *Social Ontology: Collective Intentionality and Group Agents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

practices to negotiate and modulate the meaning of underdetermined, dynamic social concepts such as those of “working.”¹⁵

All this has direct relevance to Venturinha’s essay. Social reality pops up throughout his argument, sometimes in unexpected places. When discussing the conceptual dependence of direct empirical evidence on what Wittgenstein called *hinges*—“the necessary evidence to situate us in experience regulating what is and is not subjected to doubt”¹⁶—Husserl *proto-proto-doxa*, and Gil *primary evidence*, he resorts to the following example:

If I present my passport to produce evidence of my identity, an extensive field of primary evidence will keep on working beneath that proof. It is this horizon of prima facie evidence that is under scrutiny. [...] What is at issue is not the verifiable existence or truth of a certain thing—e.g. my passport—but what allows me to hold a certain thing—again, my passport—to exist or to be true.¹⁷

“What allows my passport to exist,” “an extensive field of primary evidence working beneath” is, again, the thick background of social reality: nation-states, borders, citizenship rules, international agreements on the rules of entry, immigration officers, business or leisure travel, etc. According to Searle,¹⁸ the social world is *ontologically subjective*: it exists only thanks to subjective intentional acts of individual human beings, who decide, for instance, that this type of a small notebook with a picture counts as a passport, but this one as a vaccination record. (The *ontologically objective* natural world would by contrast exist as well without any human experience, as argued by Venturinha too.) However, it is *epistemically objective*: it consists largely of subject-independent facts which could be subjected to objective inquiry, e.g., in sociology or economics. *That* this document is a passport and not a vaccination card is not a subjective experience of an immigration officer, but a fact that we both need to recognize—and if we don’t, we can go through the motions of public reason, perhaps in a court, to settle this fact. (*Epistemically subjective* perceptions—“your passport looks red in this light, strange...”—are, again, carefully described by Venturinha via the classic work of Descartes, Kant, Husserl, and others.) Why mention this? Well, *descriptions* can be (epistemically) objective or subjective, and *situations* can be (ontologically) objective or subjective too. So we have four scenarios here: objective descriptions of the objective, natural world (e.g., natural sciences); objective descriptions of the

¹⁵ See Peter Ludlow, *Living Words: Meaning Underdetermination and the Dynamic Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁶ Venturinha, *Description of Situations*, 52.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁸ Searle, *Making the Social World*.

subjective, social world (e.g., social sciences); subjective descriptions of the objective, natural world (e.g., a still nature painting); subjective descriptions of the subjective, social world (e.g., a personal, historical narrative). I am not sure Venturinha is clear enough about which type of "descriptions of situations" he is focusing on: *All* of them? *Some* of them?

3. Propositions and Language Games

In any case, the inevitable background of social reality clearly has relevance to Venturinha's objectives, materials and methods. The deliberately chosen material from which he starts is a single "ordinary proposition" and the avowed method that of a first-person singular introspection, eternalized in the work of Descartes, Kant, and Husserl, some of the main characters in the story.¹⁹

Venturinha openly follows Wittgenstein in the methodological belief that:

[N]ew work should depart from "the analysis of an ordinary proposition, for example 'there is a lamp on my table'," inasmuch as "we should be able to get everywhere from there." This, Wittgenstein added, would be in agreement with a conviction he was forming in himself according to which his volume should proceed from "a description of nature," something specified as "the description of a situation," with this containing "the material for all the rest" (*Vienna Edition*, vol 3, MS 110: 243, my translation). Although his later writings exhibit traces of this methodology, possibly consisting of the first experiment in contextualist epistemology, there is no item in Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* that corresponds specifically to the pathway proposed in that remark.²⁰

Note here that "there is a lamp on my table" is, on the most straightforward interpretation, a protocol sentence that needs (and allows for) no more than a thin description of the ontologically objective world: "a description of nature." No tricky, socially recognizable *as* something entity is being involved here—perhaps beyond the "my-ness" of the table, which might presuppose the notion of private ownership, but not necessarily so ("my" might just as well signify a temporary possessive, such as when "my table" in the library is the one that I just put my books on and sat at). This, we might say, is a crucial delimitation of Wittgenstein here, one that spares him the trouble of getting into the Pandora's box of thick descriptions, descriptions of society. This delimitation is, however, also a serious limitation, and one he became acutely aware of when working toward *Philosophical Investigations*. There, as we all know, rather than a single ordinary proposition describing nature, Wittgenstein chose as a point of departure the

¹⁹ See Venturinha, *Description of Situations*, chapters 8, 9, and 10, respectively.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, ix–x.

language “meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B”²¹ and, consequently, a language-game, “the whole, consisting of language and the activities into which it is woven.”²² Wittgenstein perhaps realized that the project of departing from a single proposition—the basic method of logical analysis, esp. around the 1930s—is a futile project. Instead, in order to investigate the connection between language and situation, the underlying theme of Venturinha’s essay, we need to take a wholly different perspective, that of language games and forms of life that determine our uses of language all the way down to single sentences and words.

Venturinha is, of course, aware of all that. He duly acknowledges “the difficulties associated to a view that turns on an internalist axis”²³ and agrees with Wittgenstein that:

As soon as we begin to question our situation, we see that the natural perspective we have of ourselves and the world is grounded on evidence that did not result from an inquiry. It is precisely a natural evidence, one that was acquired, as the later Wittgenstein would have it, in the “practice of language.”²⁴

Indeed, the closing chapters of the book (11 and 12) clearly look toward the social aspect of language, public reason, and moral social commitment as the solution to the initial puzzle. This, however, generates a certain tension in the philosophical method and orientation, namely that between the first-person phenomenological epistemology and the third-person social ontology (compare Descartes’s “I” descriptions with Ryle’s “he,” late Wittgenstein’s “they,” and Searle’s and Tuomela’s “we” descriptions of situations). Via his Wittgensteinian inspiration, Venturinha maneuvers between the two—like so many philosophers before him, notably Husserl—but at times the results remain unclear.

4. Argumentation: Defeaters and Presumptions

In his closing argument, Venturinha addresses another crucial tension of his essay, namely the one between contextualism and objectivism. Returning once again to Wittgenstein’s *hinges*, he claims the following:

The acquisition and use of what I have called key epistemic operators are for him subordinated to the natural course of our lives and not to any social determination. That even babies apply modal categories when they take an object

²¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd edition by G.E.M. Anscombe and Rush Rhees, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), § 2.

²² Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 7.

²³ Venturinha, *Description of Situations*, 15.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

as existing, looking at it or touching it, is not something caused by our socialization. Some animals do exactly the same at a basic level. What this shows is that our social dependency, with its rule-following, lies within a deeper form of ontological dependence which matches the very idea of human nature. This opens the way to conciliate the contextualism that must be conceived in order to render a situation epistemologically intelligible with the objectivism that a contextualist perspective seems to challenge, with sceptical paradoxes appearing in an entirely new light.²⁵

This passage opens several philosophically fascinating issues. Can we construct a defeasible but solid argument to the effect that social reality, at its bottom, “matches the very idea of human nature”? Can we defend some kind of isomorphism or correspondence between the social and the natural order? Will, for instance, Cohen’s “moron society” and “genius society”²⁶ match human nature in relevantly similar ways in their epistemic endeavors? Would they share enough of common hinges to corroborate Venturinha’s objectivist argument? If, as argued extensively by the late Wittgenstein, Davidson and many others, our knowledge is essentially conceptual and thus language-dependent, would we eventually not need a concept of language that is different than the late Wittgenstein’s? Some kind of “natural” language over and above socially-determined practices of language? This list of hard questions can easily continue...

One possible path to explore when facing these questions would be something in the spirit of an argumentative version of social epistemology, as developed, among others, by Goldman²⁷ and Rescher²⁸—but also, in a much more embryonic form, by Cohen,²⁹ whose work is extensively discussed by Venturinha. This path, it seems, would be congenial to many of Venturinha’s ideas and solutions. One crucial concept here would be the counterpart of defeaters, namely *presumption*.³⁰ While Pollock’s concept of defeaters is part and parcel of contextualist epistemology, Rescher argues that what is left after the relevant defeaters of *q* are successfully overcome, is not the knowledge of *q*, but rather presumptive acceptance of *q*, the acceptance of the so far best “truth-candidate” *q*.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁶ Stewart Cohen, “Knowledge, Context, and Social Standards,” *Synthese* 73 (1987): 3–26.

²⁷ Alvin I. Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

²⁸ Nicholas Rescher, *Presumption and the Practices of Tentative Cognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²⁹ Cohen, “Knowledge, Context, and Social Standards.”

³⁰ Marcin Lewiński, “Argumentation Theory without Presumptions,” *Argumentation* 31 (2017): 591–613; Rescher, *Presumption and the Practices of Tentative Cognition*; Maciej Witek, “Illocution and Accommodation in the Functioning of Presumptions,” *Synthese* (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-019-02459-4>.

In lieu of firmer yet unattainable grounds, presumption authorizes us to reason *as if* the premises were true and *as if* the inference was warranted to reach a conclusion on which we can then proceed *as if* it were true.³¹ Importantly, this *as-ifness* is not Husserl's first-person *as-ifness* understood as perceptual modality (discussed by Venturinha on pp. 75-76), but an intersubjective *as-ifness*, achieved in collective critical testing of claims through public argumentative practices. The endpoint of such practices would be presumptive, intersubjectively shared evidence not unlike in Cohen's proposal.³² Moreover, argumentative discussions—as epitomized in Socratic dialectic—also bring about the all-important conceptual clarification, sometimes intricately indistinguishable from substantive inquiry.³³ In this way, it is indeed Wittgenstein's natural "practice of language" that generates the evidence we can intersubjectively understand and scrutinize.

However, it is of course all too easy to create partial alternative proposals without taking the entire burden of proof necessary for a book. This is the privilege of the commentator. The privilege of the author is to have the book published and to go with glee through the easily refutable criticisms of commentators. I hope I have only produced those—otherwise, I wouldn't have done justice to Venturinha's work well done at his table.

³¹ Lewiński, "Argumentation Theory without Presumptions."

³² Cohen, "Knowledge, Context, and Social Standards."

³³ Donald Davidson, "Dialectic and Dialogue," in *Language, Mind and Epistemology*, eds. Gerhard Preyer et al. (Dordrecht: Springer, 1994), 429–437; Ludlow, *Living Words*.